

BUILDING A LIFE WITHOUT SUBSTANCE ABUSE: THE ROLE OF ICT- MEDIATED IDENTITIES AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

1.0 Introduction

The aim of this project is to develop knowledge of factors significant to the process of building a life without substance abuse. Focus is upon factors related to the experience of control over self-disclosure and identity, and how different media-contingent contexts can influence these factors in a rehabilitative process. The study will examine these notions within the context of self-help groups as practiced within the traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) movement. By studying AA groups, both face-to-face and online (Internett), the study will illuminate the role of different medium-defined contexts in a rehabilitation phase for substance abusers.

The project will focus on the only Norwegian text-based AA group on the Internett where the members communicate in Norwegian. The group is called Alphamail and has about sixty members. Alphamails meetings take place by members sending a message to an e-mail list, where all sixty members on the list receive and can respond to the message.

The starting point for the proposal stems from two lines of research. The first is my Master's thesis "Substance abuse as existential weight loss" completed in 2002 at the Department of Education, University of Tromsø (Bjerke, 2002). The thesis is based on the theoretical analysis of own personal experiences as a substance abuser. The second line of research has been conducted at The Norwegian Centre for Telemedicine (NST). Here, a series of studies has focused upon the role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in interpersonal relationships (e.g. doctor-patient, peer group relationships), and thus also peoples' abilities to cope with their health issues (ref. rube og bit). In 2003, these two lines of research merged in a preliminary study headed by the applicant. The study was conducted in collaboration with the Section for Drug and Psychiatry at the University hospital of Northern Norway (UNN) and the Norwegian Centre for Telemedicine (NST), and funded through the North Norwegian Psychiatric Research Centre (NNPF) and the Norwegian Directorate for Health and Social Welfare. The study explores the role of ICT (mobile SMS and e-mail) in the follow-up care of eight clients with a double-diagnosis (simultaneously drug abuse and psychiatric diagnosis). The clients could send mobile SMS or e-mails to their contact persons at the section over a 4-month period. The study is in its final phase, and is currently being documented in a report and article which will be available in September this year.

The current proposal will build upon this ongoing collaboration, in addition to working with (AA) in Norway. In a future perspective we wish to establish and put into practice a self-help group on the Internet for clients who are in the follow up care at the section for Drug and Psychiatry (UNN). This project will create necessary knowledge and directions for this future task. The project is hosted by NST and will result in three international publications as the basis for a doctoral dissertation in my PhD programme at the Department of Education, University of Tromsø.

2.0 Background

Research on substance abuse is dominated by studies on the effects of various interventions (NOU 2003:4, Research on the field of drugs). Still, few effects have been documented by the relatively large number of these studies. The commissions report (ibid) has been criticised for a one-sided focus on effectiveness measures. We lack sufficient knowledge about the reality in which we are intervening, and thus also how or why different interventions are working or not. Also, we know practically nothing of how they work over time.

If we do not understand what substance abuse means to people in different contexts, and how such significance or meaning develops over time among people, we also risk interventions becoming irrelevant (Hauge, 2004).

A major challenge in designing intervention methods for drug addicts – whether they are ICT-based or not – is to understand the role of intoxication in the lives of abusers and how this interplays with efforts to reduce abuse.

2.1 Substance abuse in late modern society

My dissertation (Bjerke, 2002), is an effort to enhance our understandings of the meaning of substance abuse. Substance abuse is described as an identity project in modern society. As well as being a problem for the individual, substance abuse is a phenomenon which expresses conditions and features of our modern culture - especially the conditions and features described by Bauman (1991), Giddens (1991) and Sennett (1977). Bauman and Giddens describe the options facing individuals to find their own sense of direction for personal and social identity in an ever more volatile and fragmented modern Western culture. In this setting, individuals' experience of being unable to articulate aspects of themselves becomes important. They strive to find ways of expressing themselves in an increasingly changeable culture, and the result is an existential battle to create a subjective space for oneself which provides meaning. Sennett (1977) describes western culture as a “tyranny of openness”. Furthermore, Sennett points out that people being open is not necessarily a criteria of intimacy between humans. There is a need for “social distance”, he says. On the basis of this theoretical framework, the experience of intoxication is described as a tool; a tool that facilitates an experience of control and personal identity. It provides the intoxicated individual with the experience of having control over self-disclosure, which is strongly related to the individual experience of self. “Control over self-disclosure” is understood as the experience of freedom by individuals to choose what and how much one exposes of oneself, in what situations and how comfortable it feels.

The study represents perspectives rarely discussed in the scientific literature. It can thus contribute to a more thorough understanding of the drug experience and its subsidiary function, and an understanding of the cultural components of substance abuse in our modern society.

2.2 ICT and shamebased syndroms

“I needed help, but I didn’t want them (municipal social workers) on my doorstep”, explained one of the participants in the pilot study exploring the role of ICT (mobile SMS and e-mail) in the follow-up of eight substance abusers (see introduction). One explanation for this statement might be the need for social distance as we mentioned earlier. Another client in the same project had sold the mobile phone he had received through the project, but bought it back for more than he had earned by selling it; “It just made me feel connected, even though I didn’t contact the section that much”. The preliminary results from this pilot study indicate that users value the options ICT provides for regulating contact with support systems.

Similarly, studies of ICT use among persons with social anxiety and/or shame-based disorders (e.g. substance abuse, eating disorders, sexually marginalised groups) argue that ICT enhances the experience of *control over self-disclosure* in interaction with the surrounding world (Derlega, Metts, Petroni, Margulis, 1993).

For example, some people with these disorders experience the Internet's option of anonymity as the safest channel for interacting with others as their 'true self' (see, for example, McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Kummervold et al, 2002; Walter, 1996). This element of *control over self-disclosure* in ICT-mediated interaction is also evident when the interacting parties know each other's identity (Gammon, Rosenvinge, 2001; Rimehaug, 2002). Of those participating in online discussion forum, 75% found it easier to discuss personal problems online than face to face (Kummervold et al, 2002). However, this experience of control over self disclosure or opportunity for openness in interaction with others, also has a downside. Researchers have found that people are prone to behave more bluntly when they are communicating by e-mail or electronic newsgroup, than what they would in a face to face situation (Mc Kenna & Bargh, 2000). Anonymity reduces potential real life sanction, and may stimulate non-responsible behaviour. The lack of social cues may cause people to "flame", to send messages with a more extremely emotive content than what they would with the immediate feedback of face to face contact (Olson & Olson, 2003; Skårderud, 2002). However, this is claimed to be a relatively limited phenomenon (Lea, M. & Spears, R, 1995). Sherry Turkle provides ample examples of how ICT-mediated interaction interplays with identity-building processes – for better and worse. For worse it is possible that the freedom to distort ones identity on the Internet, can result in mistrust among the members of a group (Turkle, 1997).

Apart from the practical uses of ICT, it gives us new opportunities for insights into basic social and psychological phenomenon through a wider range of contexts and modes for interaction. (Bargh, Mc Kenna, 2003).

2.3 Self-help groups and empowerment

This projects understanding of peer to peer or self-help groups is based on Matzat's (1987) definition. According to Matzat, a self-help group brings people together who experience the same problem, usually of medical, social or behavioural character. Self-help is described in contrast to bureaucratic, professional and commercial institutions. Self-help groups' focus on experience-based knowledge in relation to their own problem, has clear parallels to "empowerment" (Eidheim, 2000). It is argued that powerlessness and incapacitating life situations are turned into human growth through participation in self-help groups.

Many have sought to define and operationalize the concept of "empowerment". The concept of "empowerment" is emphasized as essential in a health-promoting perspective (St.meld. nr 16 (2002-2003), and is used in many ways and in a wide range of contexts (Rowlands 1997). This project builds upon Cheater's definition. (...) *The term "empowerment" as used in the 1990s seems above all to be about being vocal, having a right "voice"* (Cheater, 1999:4 in Eidheim, 2000). Empowerment thus reflects the strengthening of the individual's ability to express his or her needs and goals. To achieve this, individuals must have access to a set of words and concepts, signs and metaphors, which give meaning to and enable an understanding of them selves and their life situation. I will argue that one of the most important potential benefits for participants in self-help groups is the access to such a set of concepts which can create meaning.

This is reflected in studies, which is based on the participants' own reports. The participants often emphasize the role of being among peers in a fellowship (Diemer, Stenbak, 1992; Goksøyr, 1992). This fellowship is built through expressions and recognitions of common experiences. Through others, one learns new ways of expressing emotions and experiences that can give new meaning to

ones own experiences and self perceptions. Ultimately, it is the strength and solidarity in the fellowship which heal, says Yalom (1995). In self-help groups, the individual not only helps him- or herself. Being together, communicating and exchanging experiences with others represent important aspects of the help. Thus, in the final analysis, it is the social relationships which are vital for recovery (Yalom, 1995).

In British Medical Journal's recent theme issue on electronic communication and health (15 May, 2004), Eysenbach argues: "Given the abundance of unmoderated peer to peer groups on the Internet, research is required to evaluate under which conditions and for whom electronic support groups are effective and how effectiveness in delivering social support electronically can be maximised" (Eysenbach, 2004).

3.0 Objectives and research issues

The issues outlined above (sections 2.1 - 2.3), and possible relationships between them, will be examined in AA groups both online and face-to-face. I will argue that substance abuse may be understood in light of issues related to control over self disclosure and identity in modern culture. Furthermore, that these issues will be reflected in substance abusers' participation in self-help groups, and through different media contexts (face-to-face and online).

Based on this, the objectives of this project are to:

1. further developing and refining theoretical concepts related to 'control over self-disclosure' and 'identity' as core elements in understanding substance abuse in modern society.
2. providing insights into the roles different medium-defined contexts for group interaction (i.e. face-to-face and online) can have, relative to the process of building a life without substance abuse ,concepts in focus (i.e. control over self- disclosure and identity).

Based on the theoretical framework and earlier studies outlined in 2.1-2.3, a working hypothesis might be that being physically removed from social settings is conducive to fellowship in modern society. Virtual settings reduce many of the expectations and demands that one is bombarded with in real life settings. Virtual settings also protect one from communicating aspects of one's self (e.g. physical appearance, mannerisms) involuntarily. This may have the paradoxical effect of increasing self-disclosure. Thus, fellowship can be facilitated more effectively since interaction isn't cluttered with irrelevant social cues and accompanying social expectations (Bargh & Mc Kenna, 2003).

An alternative, but not necessarily opposing hypothesis, might be that self help on the Internet reflect trends towards individualization in modern society. Everyone is the architect of his or her own lives. Sitting alone at home, communicating with others through PCs reflects this. The act of formulating one's self (disclosure) is less a social act, than something one does for one's self to make sense of one' own identity. Self-help is thus less a practice of helping oneself *through others*, than helping oneself by oneself.

The study will seek to illuminate these issues and how they may interplay with substance abusers efforts to live lives without substance abuse.

4.0 Materials and method

AA groups in Norway, both the physical groups and the Norwegian Internet group Alphamail, have a direct connection with the now 69 year old world wide organisation, sharing it's standardised principles and traditions (AA, 1959; AA, 1969). I have established contact with the contact person of the Alfamail group and several of the traditional groups. These unanimously express confidence in the members' willingness to participate in the studies. Since AA is a non-hierarchic organisation with no leaders, this expression of confidence is the closest one can get to a letter of confirmation. The opportunity to conduct this project within their organisation is unique, and largely due to my previously involvements.

The main methods will be participatory observation and semi-structured interviews, along with literature studies. I will participate in AA meetings in which the users meet face to face and in Alfamail. Communities which are relevant to AA members, involving social contexts outside the meetings and open meetings for everybody who wants to know more about the organisation, will also be visited.

As a starting point, three members from both the offline and online AA-group will be selected from active members that have been in the group for at least 2-3 years. It is expected that they will be able to express themselves with greater awareness about their choice and participation in the various groups. In the interviews I will try to elicit the participants' narratives, that is, the participants' perceptions, experience and accounts of their life as substance abusers, participation in AA groups and other treatment or self-help experiences. These interviews, the participatory observation and further literature studies during the project, will provide the foundation for the theoretical sampling of the rest of the informants. A total of twenty interviews are planned, but this number might be adjusted according to whether theoretical saturation is accomplished (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

After the first ten interviews are conducted, it will be decided if the projects objectives are better fulfilled with a survey, than with completing the last ten planned interviews. If this is determined, all of the about 60 members in the online AA-group will receive an online survey. In order to assure a sufficient sample of offline participants, 10 of the 165 groups in Norway will be randomly sampled. The contact person for each of these groups will be contacted by telephone, and asked to hand out questionnaires at the next meeting, as well as putting aside 10 minutes of the meeting for filling it out. A personalized follow up of non-compliant groups will be conducted in order to ensure a high response rate. The questionnaire will be designed based on the preliminary findings.

Since one of the objectives is to develop knowledge of the respondents' experience and thoughts, the analysis of the qualitative material will use a phenomenological analytical approach which is inspired by Giorgi and modified by Malterud (2003). The analysis has four stages, and for this purpose the project will use the computer program "Nvivo". In the analysis we will explore the possible interaction between several factors: context for interaction (self-help groups face to face vs. online self-help), degrees of anonymity (real life contrasted with virtual reality, experienced control over personal self- disclosure, experiences of self as abuser/non-abuser, and the characteristics of the conditions, such as social stigmatization. If a survey is conducted, these data will primarily be used to supplement interpretations of the qualitative data. A more suitable computer program (like SPSS) will be used for this analysis.

It is a risk of interpreting the respondents' narratives in the light of my own experiences, thus risking bias. Basically, this is a matter of methodologically sound management of closeness and distance (Paulgaard, 2000; Bjerke, 2002). It is important to be aware of and to discuss these issues with the partners involved. Throughout the research process, it will be natural to make this issue subject to discussion in light of methodology and theory of science (Geertz, 1988; van Maanen, 1988).

5.0 Project partners and environment

The University of Tromsø (UiTø) is academically responsible for progression and completion of Bjerke's doctorate programme and the thesis. Gry Paulgaard, dr. Polit. at the Department of Education, UiTø, will be the principal supervisor for the duration of the project.

The Norwegian Centre for Telemedicine (NST) is the formal employer of the candidate, and thus responsible for providing personell support and office infrastructure. NST has 12 years experience in developing, implementing and evaluating ICT-based applications in health care. NST currently has NFR-funding for 4 PhD projects and one post-doctorate. The PhD student will be based at NST's eHealth Consumer Programme consisting of 18 interdisciplinary professionals. The program's mission is to contribute to knowledge about how ICT can empower people in their efforts to improve and maintain good health.

Professor Helge Waal, Department for clinical substance abuse, University of Oslo, is co-advisor to the project. Waal is among Norway's foremost experts in the field of substance abuse.

Psychiatrist and researcher Finn Skårderud, at the Regional Centre for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Oslo, was opponent for Bjerke's Master thesis. He has subsequently worked with Bjerke in developing the ideas for this project along with other projects at NST. He will continue supporting Bjerke with clinical and methodological guidance.

Solbjørg Talseth, head of Norwegian Self-help Forum has had an advisory role relative to the ideological and methodological roots and practice of self-help in Norway and will continue in this role.

This PhD project is one of 3 proposal submitted by NST to HELSEFUNN, all of which address factors related to the uses of ICT for health promotion and disease prevention. Given success in funding these projects, Norway will be building a broad and robust research environment uniquely positioned to respond to strategies outline by EU's health ministers at the June 6th meeting (http://www.eu2004.ie/templates/news.asp?sNavlocator=66&list_id=799). Here member states are encouraged to develop and implement e-health in the context of national strategies and of Community programmes in the field of public health.

6.0 Progress schedule

	Spring 2005	Autumn 2005	Spring 2006	Autumn 2006	Spring 2007	Autumn 2007	Spring 2008	Autumn 2008
Recommendation from REK [ethical committee] exists	x							
PhD courses	x	x						
Interviews		x						
Participatory observation	x	x	x	x				
Data analysis		x	x					
Interviews				x				
Survey, if considered more productive			x	x				
Data analysis					x			
Article 1 submitted						x		
Article 2 submitted							x	
Article 3 submitted							x	

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